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European Union

FAIRS Product Specific

EU Discusses Botulism Warning on Honey 2003

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Report Highlights:

No decision has been made on the need for a mandatory labeling requirement warning for infant botulism caused by honey consumption.

Includes PSD changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Brussels USEU [BE2], E2

Compulsory labeling measures to warn consumers about the risk of infant botulism related to honey consumption were discussed by the EU's Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health. The Standing Committee discussed this issue following the death of an infant in the Netherlands. Both epidemiological and laboratory data contributed to identifying honey as a risk factor for botulism. Since its first report in 1978, forty-nine cases of infant botulism have been described in Europe. To date, more than 1,000 cases of infant botulism have been reported in all continents (except Africa); 90 pct of them have occurred in the U.S.

At this point in time, it is not certain if the Commission will move to mandatory labeling. Most deaths have occurred in specific population groups, and Member State delegates were skeptical that labeling would be the most effective way to communicate the advice not to feed honey to children under the age of one. They feel that education efforts, e.g. through health care officials may be more effective, as certain linguistic problems are more likely to be overcome.

The discussions in the standing Committee were based on the report by the Scientific Committee on Veterinary Measures Relating to Public Health, which had been asked to assess the risk particularly for infants to acquire botulism from the consumption of honey, and to advise on the possibility for setting criteria for possible preventive measures. The Scientific Committee issued its opinion on honey and microbiological hazards in June 2002 (http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/sc/scv/out53_en.pdf).

No decisions were taken in the Standing Committee (minutes of the Dec 2002 meeting are now available from the web on http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/rc/scfcah/general/out03_en.pdf). The Commission will monitor the situation and depending on the developments observed in member states, may address this issue again in the future.

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